

Honing science to art via Bassler

By Reed Johnson

Daily News Staff Writer

From the space-age titles of his works — "Tetrahedron V," for example, or "Infinite Fractal Pyramid II" — you wouldn't suppose that Robert Bassler was a lousy student when it came to science.

Believe it, Bassler says. As a kid, he was "totally out of it" as far as reciting proofs and memorizing theorems.

How things change. Today, at 62, the longtime Northridge resident and CSUN art professor enjoys a national reputation for the geometric symmetry of his works across a wide range of media. He takes a Newtonian interest in what makes the universe tick.

And nature, in all of its sublime and chaotic forms — wind, light, granite mountains, swirling outer-space nebulae — is never far from his artistic sensibility. Like other aspects of his life and work, Bassler says, science now fits comfortably into the bigger picture of things.

"It's all beginning to come together," he says. "I'm just finally beginning to realize what I'm composed of."

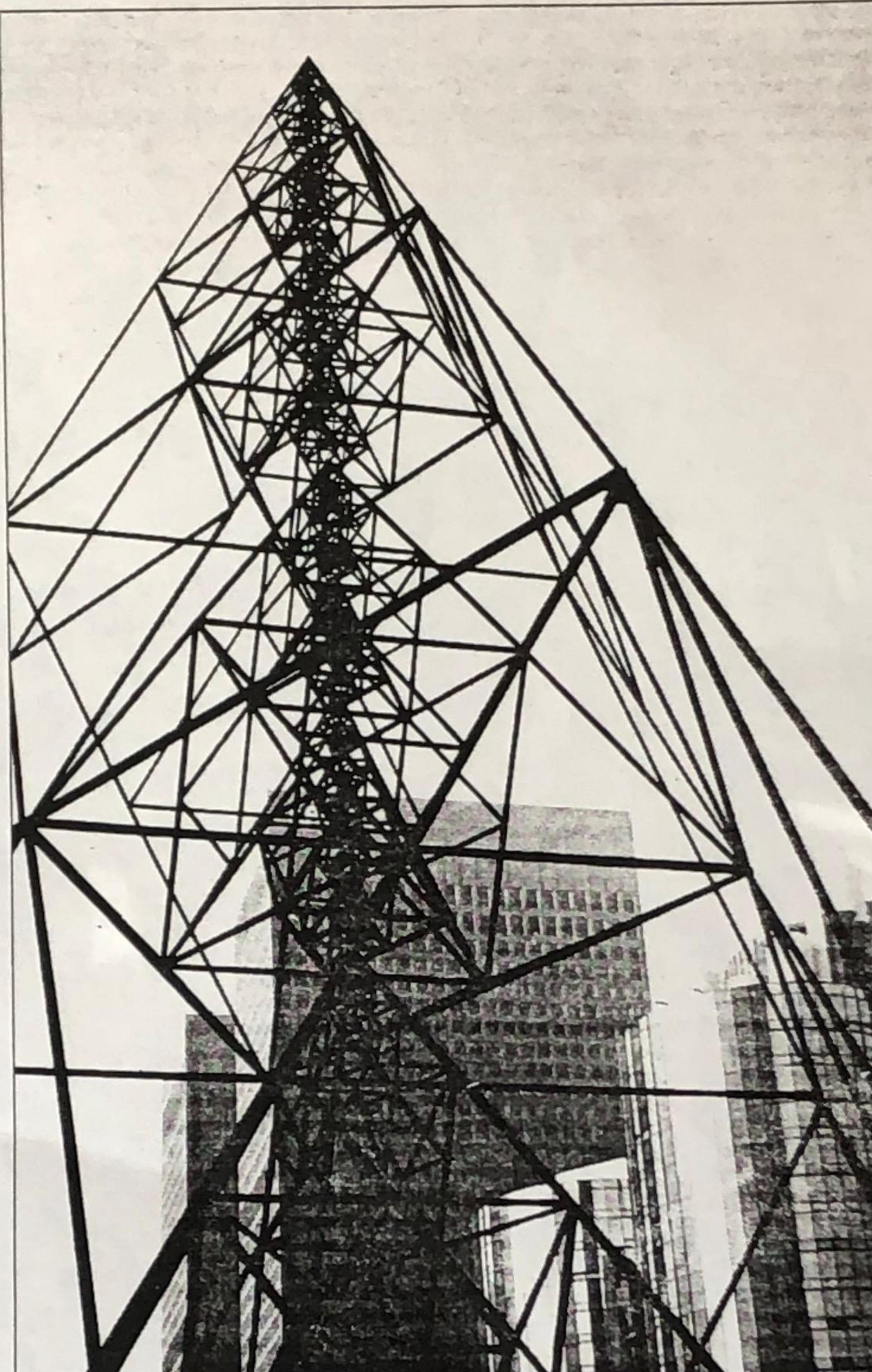
What Bassler is made up of — spiritually, creatively and even biologically speaking — is the focus of two new Valley exhibitions. "Robert Bassler: Changing Light" at CSUN's Art Gallery through Sept. 20, traces the arc of his career from 1960 to 1996. A concurrent solo show opening Sept. 2 at the Orlando Gallery in Sherman Oaks offers excerpts from three recent series of his paintings: "Vortex," "Gathered Forces" and "Portraits."

To those acquainted with his towering steel prisms and undulating blocks of polyester resin, Bassler's self-portraits may come as a mild surprise. During the past three decades, the artist has largely purged his work of any human figures, choosing instead to peer into the microscopic structure of earthly matter and the lofty designs of the cosmos.

Bassler's own authorial presence has become steadily harder to detect in his works, as his interests have taken him from Henry Moore-like figurative sculptures; to found-object constructions reminiscent of Louise Nevelson's; to conceptual photography projects; and, most recently, to pyramid-shaped canvases depicting satellite images of weather patterns and luminous astral bodies.

In such late works as "Gathered Forces," a 1987 acrylic painting of spiraling cloud formations, it's as if the artist were viewing the scene from some heavenly platform beyond human consciousness.

Bassler, you see, is something of a rarity, a contemporary artist who also happens to be a practicing — though nondogmatic — Christian. (He and his wife, Lynn, also an artist,



CSUN art professor Robert Bassler's work includes "Large-Scale Sculpture." It will be reinstalled outside the CSUN Art Gallery during the "Changing Light" exhibition.

both are members of Kirk O' the Valley Presbyterian Church in Reseda.) In Bassler's view, there's no essential difference between science and art, formula and faith, the concrete and the abstract.

Like human DNA or the Milky Way, Bassler believes, everything comes from the same cosmic dust, a spiritual essence harmonized in art.

This artist-as-astronaut perspective — think Carl Sagan with a welder's torch — is part of what can make Bassler's work hard to decipher, even to his staunchest admirers.

"The clues are barely there, and it (the work) is so refined that sometimes he's barely there," says Sharon Emanuelli, a former Bassler student who curated CSUN's exhibition.

One of CSUN's most popular instructors, Bassler for 33 years has been a highly visible on-campus presence. He and his wife have helped the Valley's fine arts community gain grudging respect from Over the Hill.

"I look at people like Bob and Lynn as artists who are totally resolved," says Orlando Gallery co-owner Robert Gino. "When you look at the work it's complete. It's not like they're looking to find their identity; they already know who they are."

True enough, although Bassler regards his life as still a work in progress.

Born in New York City, he grew up in a privileged environment where his mother, a USC art major, and his father, a Hollywood motion picture producer, supported his artistic bent.

At Bard College in upstate New York and later at USC, Bassler progressed from sculpting realistic human figures to abstract, reductive forms. Not long after he moved from Occidental College to CSUN (then known as San Fernando Valley State College), he began getting noticed through solo shows at such venues as the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery (1965) and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (1968).

Mystic and intuitive in spirit,

The facts

■ What: "Robert Bassler — Changing Light."

■ Where: California State University, Northridge, Art Gallery, 18111 Nordhoff St., Northridge.

■ When: Noon to 4 p.m. Monday and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; through Sept. 20.

■ What else: Admission free. Parking \$1.75 in Parking Lot A.

■ Information: Call (818) 677-2226.

■ What: "Robert Bassler — Selected Paintings."

■ Where: Orlando Gallery, 14553 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks.

■ When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; Sept. 2-27.

■ What else: Admission free.

■ Information: Call (818) 789-6012.

Bassler is disciplined and methodical in practice. In the mid-'60s, when sculpture and assemblage replaced painting as the hip, prestige medium, he found himself experimenting with wall-mounted reliefs and sensuous oval shapes in metal and wood.

By the early 1970s, Bassler says, he had become "disenchanted" with objects altogether. He wanted instead to show the interior life of forms, the spiritual sap seeking to break free of molecular boundaries.

That line of inquiry translated into such projects as the "Barricade" and "Cliffwall" series (1976-83). This ambitious multiformat project evolved from the image of a mountainside road barrier that Bassler had seen during a 1972 trip to Norway. He'd been struck not only by the contrasting elements of wood and rock, but by the possibility of using artistic means to reduce a man-made "barrier" to its molecular essence (a process he calls "dematerialization").

Through paintings, drawings, reliefs and sculptures, Bassler broke down the barrier's image to an atomic level. In one experiment, he photocopied a picture of the barrier, then made a copy of that copy, eventually producing a spray-pattern of dots, which he then replicated in acrylic panels.

"For Bassler, this mechanical abstraction served to penetrate the seemingly impermeable mass of the granite," Sharon Emanuelli writes in her catalog essay. "In a metaphorical sense, he had opened its inner structure."

After some hard soul-searching, he's ready for the next exploration as he faces retirement from CSUN.

"I just have a sense that I'm a part of the old order," he says. "Not that I'm not flexible enough to change. But I feel it's the right time."